

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM



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DEAR MEMBER,

In the masterly analysis of the forces that have made Nazi Germany, which formed our Supplement a fortnight ago, it was made plain that the real menace we have to face is not material but spiritual. Aeroplanes and tanks are effective only as instruments of human purposes. Man is a spiritual being and swayed by spiritual forces. What counts in the long run is the way in which he understands himself. What is happening to-day in the spiritual sphere, though more difficult to perceive, is every bit as important as the struggles on sea and land and in the air; the latter are important only because they may decide what set of beliefs will govern the future course of mankind.

It was shown in the Supplement that many of the leading minds in the younger generation in Germany have surrendered themselves to a doctrine, or rather an attitude to life, which repudiates all the values by which men have been guided in the past. It springs from the conviction that what determines the life of mankind to-day is not a new set of ideas nor a new system but a new reality of existence. It finds the meaning and satisfaction of life, if life on this view can be said to have a meaning at all, in a blind submission to the ceaseless momentum of the machine age and the irresistible drive to increasing concentrations of power. The emergence of a new spirituality—if one may use that term to include evil as well as good, the demonic as well as the divine—a new emotional attitude to life, a new scale of values, in short, a new type of man, is an event of the highest significance in history. A strong effort of the imagination is needed to take in what it means that there are men with whom we have no common language, for whom the values in which we believe are without meaning; men who in self-sacrificing surrender to the dynamic movement of life are hard, fierce, reckless, inhuman, without mercy or remorse. Yet this is a fact which we must grasp, if we are to deal with the world as it is. Moreover, we must remember that spirituality is not confined by physical boundaries. Ideas and attitudes of the soul may, like germs, be transplanted to any soil and there find a new and vigorous growth.

Side by side with this virile attitude with its intellectual strength we have to set the upsurge of the primitive elements of human nature, to which attention was also recently called in the News-Letter (C.N.-L. 79). Everywhere there are signs of a weariness of the burden of civilization—of a desire to escape from its irksome restraints. A tired humanity is inclined to throw down its packs and slip back into barbarism. The signs are by no means confined to Germany—the growth of the gangster type, impelled by a sheer desire for activity and lust of adventure, the search for sensation and thrills, the breakdown of sex conventions. All these things are the expression of an inner scepticism and despair.

We can overcome danger only by looking it in the face. But precisely when we do this, courage begins to revive. Neither the worship of power nor the despair of life can have a lasting hold over the soul of man. Brute force is purely destructive; it can create nothing. Man cannot live without hope.

The faith which has sustained man through the centuries and borne him forward is the faith that he is the servant of a purpose higher than his own, that he is not the

guardian of his own values, but that there exists, not of his making, a truth and right in which he may participate and by participating attain to his true self. Because he is related as person to a living Spirit, actively at work in the world, he can rise above the impersonal forces which threaten to engulf him and defy even the colossal power which modern techniques put into the hands of ambitious and wicked men.

The Nazi movement is one of power. It is borne forward by the release of strong emotional energies. This emotional release comes partly from an intoxicating vision of power, partly from the identification of the self with its lower impulses, which breaking all barriers burst loose in a devouring torrent. The only effective resistance to these powerful forces is the recovery, not merely as intellectual belief, but as the most real of all experiences, of the essential truth about man. We must learn to live day by day as those who are related in every thought and act to a living Spirit, who is stronger than any form of human power, and who daily restores, renews, sustains and commissions us. Our eyes are being opened to-day to what man is. He is not made for a comfortable, mediocre existence. His life is set between heaven and hell. It is the battle-ground of contending forces. It can be invaded by powers from below. But these may be overcome by opening our being to the power offered us from above. George Fox tells us in his *Journal*: "I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love which flowed over the ocean of darkness." The subject of the power of the Spirit will be treated more fully in an early Supplement by Mr. Christopher Dawson.

In this context the importance of Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr's contribution this week is apparent. He shows how faith in a God, who is above and beyond history and is at the same time involved in the struggles of history, can enable us to join with *abandon* in the fight for truth and right. Dr. Niebuhr is a professor in Union Theological Seminary, New York, and one of the most powerful forces in the religious life of America. He has already contributed two Supplements to the Christian News-Letter.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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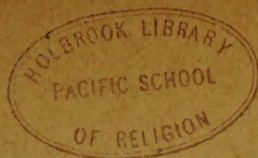
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THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD AND THE DEFENCE OF CIVILISATION

By Dr. REINHOLD NIEBUHR

Whenever a civilisation is imperilled by destruction from an obvious tyranny, whenever a social system which embodies the negation of justice confronts a civilisation which has genuine achievements of justice to its credit, it is natural for Christians to ask in what sense the Providence of God may be relied upon to avert disaster. The Christian faith in Providence is expressed most classically and perfectly in the words of St. Paul, declaring that he is "persuaded that neither life nor death . . . nor any other creature can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

GOD AS LAW AND AS LOVE

It is immediately apparent however, that St. Paul's confidence does not mean that we, or our civilisations may not die, or that we may not suffer catastrophe, or that our confidence in God may not be threatened by "depth" as well as "height" of fortune. In order to distinguish what is legitimate and what is illusory in the faith that the Providence of God includes defence of our civilisation, it is important to make a basic distinction in the character of God. The God in whom Christians believe is both "Law" and Freedom. His character is partly, though not wholly, revealed in the "structure" of the universe, in the basic laws of life. When St. John declares that "the world was made" by Christ, when he affirms that Christ is the very pattern upon which human life is moulded, he is also affirming that love and brotherhood

are the law of life. But God is not merely law or "structure." His revelation in Christ is the revelation of His freedom beyond His law, and therefore of a resource of mercy beyond His "wrath." If we should say that the wrath of God is primarily the natural punishment in which all life involves itself when it defies the law and structure of its own being, and that the mercy of God represents some more transcendent freedom by which God finally contrives to overcome evil (primarily by His own suffering), we must come to the conclusion that the law of God is most obviously involved in His Providence as it expresses itself in history, and that the freedom of God is concerned finally with the redemption of history itself. God as Law expresses Himself in the various judgments of history. God as Love expresses Himself primarily in the final judgment upon, and the final redemption of, history.

THE AMBIGUITY OF HISTORY

The Providence of God includes both what He does in history and what He does to history. It is precisely because history remains ambiguous to the end and gives no absolutely clear indication of the triumph of God over evil that Christian faith looks forward to a final judgment and a final redemption. Yet history is not meaningless. History is full of partial meanings and partial fulfilments and partial judgments, all of which point beyond themselves but all of which have some meaning within themselves. They

reveal the "hidden" sovereignty of God over history.

Let us analyse for a moment what is clear and what is ambiguous in history. It is clear that tyranny, oppression and injustice cannot maintain themselves in the end. They violate the law of life. Yet it is quite possible that a ruthless tyranny might maintain itself a little longer than one which combined a certain measure of moral scruple with ruthlessness. To speak in contemporary terms, Germany might, by taking advantage of both the virtues and the vices of civilisation, succeed in establishing a monopoly of violence in the world; and such violence might maintain itself for some time precisely because it was without moral scruple, and because it had harnessed the efficiency of a technical civilisation to the purposes of tyranny. It is certain that tyranny violates the law of life too much to succeed in the long run. But it might succeed in the short run; and the short runs of history may be quite long from the perspective of a single generation. Yet the moral ambiguity of a history which sometimes gives triumph of consistent evil over inconsistent good must be admitted.

As against such a dark possibility it is more probable that the free peoples will finally triumph over this tyranny. If they do, the cause of their triumph will probably be that "moral" factors have outweighed technical advantages. A good conscience is better support for morale than a bad conscience. The solidarity of men associated together in freedom will outlast the coerced solidarity of slaves. When victory comes, the resistance of once free peoples, now despoiled of their liberties, will contribute to it, and the words of the prophet will be fulfilled: "Woe unto those who spoil and are not spoiled . . . when they cease to spoil they will be spoiled." All these, and many others that might be mentioned,

are moral factors in the struggle between civilisation and tyranny.

TRAGIC DEFEAT IN HISTORY

Yet history is too complex to yield a simple "moral" picture of the triumph of good over evil. There are tragic defeats in history. The essence of tragedy is that something is destroyed which ought not be destroyed; and sometimes it is an inadequate virtue rather than a vice which causes defeat. Let us enumerate some of the moral ambiguities of history which belong to this category of tragic defeat.

(1) Ignorance rather than vice may cause defeat. The farmers of a middle western state of America do not know how deeply they are involved in the world's tragedy and in responsibility for the world's order. Their "isolationism" might cause American aid to be too tardy.

(2) An ignorance which is partly moral and partly technical may contribute to the defeat of the relatively just cause. One thinks of all the "good" people in all the western democracies who did not understand human nature and therefore did not understand Hitler. They underestimated the possibility of evil in history. There were others who did not understand (and in America do not yet understand) that history is never a realm of pure reason but a realm of conflicting vitalities, and that "power" elements cannot be eliminated from the struggle for justice, nor the struggle for justice be eliminated from such brotherhood as can be achieved in history. The vapid and shallow character of our democratic culture would have much to do with defeat, if the democracies were defeated; and it has to bear a great responsibility for a situation in which civilisation has been brought so close to disaster. The illusions of a "liberal" culture are not as evil as the obsessions of a totalitarian world: but they might nevertheless prove fatal.

(3) Past injustices, since atoned for by new standards of justice, and yet weighing in the present situation through an evil legacy of resentful memories, might weaken the cause which is essentially just. (One thinks of Ireland.)

(4) Comparatively harmless moral defects can prove more disastrous than the more obvious moral defects. The negative selfishness of a nation which merely wants to be left alone is not as grievous as the imperialism of a nation which wants to enslave other peoples. Yet this negative nationalism of all the small democracies of Europe and of America has given Hitler the chance to deal with his opponents one by one instead of being forced to meet their common resistance. The temper of Britain before Munich belongs to this same category of evil, but it has been atoned for so heroically that the nations, such as my own, who have made no atonement, have no right to speak of it.

In this same category of negative but dangerous moral evil belongs the pride of established nations and empires, which tend to forget the precarious nature of all historic achievement and therefore overestimate their security. With Babylon of old they say "I am a queen and I shall be no widow and I shall never know sorrow," and therefore in "one moment shall her sorrow come."

(5) Purely technical defects or geographic contingencies may contribute to the defeat of the just cause. The German supremacy in the air was achieved through various delinquencies of the Allies; but the comparatively undeveloped industrial establishment of France would have made her deficient in mechanised equipment, even if her army experts had been less traditional.

THE RELATION OF THE TECHNICAL AND THE MORAL

It is significant, however, that strong moral factors may outweigh such de-

ficiencies. The will to continue the fight, which France lacked, and which Britain expressed with heroic consistency last June, is never a purely physical or biological factor in the history of man. Moral elements are involved in it. The essential social health of Britain, the fruit of decades of growth in democratic justice, lay at the foundation of this stronger will.

Yet technical elements may outweigh moral factors. I have known virtuous men to kill themselves by overwork more quickly than dissolute drunkards killed themselves by excess. The former did not violate a moral law but they violated a law of life. They were immoral only in the sense that they succumbed to a kind of spiritual pride, which forgets that man is a physical organism and that his spirit cannot exist in history without an adequate physical foundation. The Scandinavian democracies, which prided themselves upon their democratic achievements but forgot that their security rested upon the British navy and a precarious balance of power in Europe, were analogous to the individuals who forget the physical basis of their life. Defeat which is caused by such mistakes is tragic: for the punishment seems disproportionate to the crime. Yet it is the business of man to know not only the moral laws of social intercourse but the physical laws which underlie his spiritual existence.

The whole of our bourgeois civilisation made mistakes of which the Scandinavian illusions are only typical. A bourgeois civilisation falsely imagines that it has "spiritualised" life by transmuting the tension between life and life from the battlefield to the counting house. The operations of the counting house are more "bloodless" than those of the battle field, and to the bourgeois mind this creates the illusion that they are more ethical.

There is, in short, no unambiguous record of the triumph of good over evil in history. In the modern period it has been assumed that the ambiguities of the present would be eliminated in the future. This is what the modern man means by his faith in progress. But the fact that there is no period in history in which some men will not be tempted to confess: "My feet had well nigh slipped, my step was almost gone, when I beheld the prosperity of the wicked."

THE ETERNAL HOPE AND THE STRUGGLES OF HISTORY

It is for this reason that the Christian rightly appeals to eternity rather than to the future for the validation of his faith in Providence. He knows that no vicissitude of history and no confusion of the contingencies of nature, which man can never completely conquer or transcend, can finally triumph over the will of God to redeem history. That is why the New Testament sets all the judgments of God in history against the hope of a final judgment and a final redemption. The freedom of God is His freedom over history.

It must be observed, however, that the eternity to which Christian faith appeals is not some undifferentiated eternity which wipes out all distinctions of good and evil in history. The God who is revealed in Christ cannot annul the evil in human history without taking it upon and within Himself. He is engaged in history. For this reason the Christian does not regard the rise and fall of civilisations with equanimity. He takes historic struggles for justice and freedom seriously and knows that the eternity which fulfils history will not negate what is good in

history. It will fulfil what is incomplete and purge what is sinful.

It is this genius for being involved in, and yet transcending, the vicissitudes of history which makes Biblical faith superior to both the this-worldly religions, which seek to find the meaning of history in the historical process itself, and to the other-worldly religions, which flee history for a passionless eternity. A Biblical faith in Providence prompts Christians to take historic struggles for justice and righteousness seriously; and yet to have a final resource against despair when the balance sheet of an age, decade or generation does not make sense, or makes only tragic sense.

Some degree of indifference toward the outcome of historic struggles is actually a resource which contributes to the vigour of our exertions for the cause which we deem just. The young Nazi, informed by a pagan philosophy which is accurately expressed in the "all or nothing" slogan of Hitler, must notice the canker of despair in even his most fanatic enthusiasm. If it will not be all, it will truly be nothing; for he faces not only the defeat of his cause but the meaninglessness of life, since his cause was of the type which exhausted the meaningfulness of existence.

There is thus a sense in which the faith that "neither life nor death can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" may free us to strive for the achievement of the right in life and history with a greater abandon, and with a consequent greater success, because of our ability to maintain a degree of indifference toward our own personal fortunes and even toward the fortunes of our cause.

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